

## Against the Grain

---

Volume 21 | Issue 4

Article 6

---

September 2009

# Perserving the Vitality of Learning Commons Spaces Through Dynamic Programming: The Learning Commons After Dark Series

Jennifer Calvo

North Carolina State University, [jenni4calvo@gmail.com](mailto:jenni4calvo@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Calvo, Jennifer (2009) "Perserving the Vitality of Learning Commons Spaces Through Dynamic Programming: The Learning Commons After Dark Series," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 21: Iss. 4, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2437>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

## Going Green in the Library ... from page 36

as existing equipment or behaviors, as well as understanding the barriers to overcome, are part of the planning process. And don't be isolated; find out what is going on in your community and within your larger organization. True sustainability requires partnership and collaboration.

The entrepreneurial librarian sees crisis as opportunity. The current environmental and economic crisis is motivating people and institutions across the world to rethink traditional processes towards those that are more sustainable. We believe libraries and librarians can serve as progressive exemplars for taking measurable action in a practical, affordable manner. The steps towards sustainability we take in each of our libraries can have a profound positive impact on the environment, public budgets and even the behavior of our patrons.

You can find the panel's presentation, as well as a plethora of resources for Greening your own Library at: <http://greeningyourlibrary.pbworks.com/InspirationInnovation-Celebration>. 🌱

## Rumors from page 26

guess who were the special guests? **Anthony Watkinson** <[anthony.watkinson@btopenworld.com](mailto:anthony.watkinson@btopenworld.com)> and his lovely wife **Sara**! They had just come from the wedding of their son **Charles**. You will remember that **Charles Watkinson** has been a regular attendee at Charleston.

*continued on page 46*

## against the grain people profile

Former Reference Librarian for the Learning Commons, NCSU Libraries  
2001 Farmington Grove Drive, Raleigh, NC 27614  
Phone: (919) 649-5580 • <[jenni4calvo@gmail.com](mailto:jenni4calvo@gmail.com)>

### Jennifer Calvo

**EARLY LIFE:** I spent most of my early years hanging out in public libraries after school. I would sit on the floor and page through 1970's editions of *Better Homes and Gardens* decorating books. Unfortunately I was never able to convince my mother to go with a chartreuse and purple color scheme in the living room.

**EDUCATION:** BA: Political Science, **University of North Carolina at Greensboro**. MSLS: **University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**.

**FIRST JOB:** A junior camp counselor. There is nothing better than arts and crafts in the morning, horseback riding before lunch, and swimming in the afternoon after eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

**PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES:** I have worked and volunteered in a variety of library and museum settings, including law firms, public libraries, art museums, and science libraries. For the past six years I have worked for **NCSU Libraries**. Originally I was hired as a graduate assistant, but was promoted to the position of Reference Librarian for the **Learning Commons**.

**IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO:** In between visiting museums and botanical gardens, I like to encourage Soul Train lines in the library.

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** *Slaughterhouse Five*, *Kurt Vonnegut*, *Mr. Summer's Story*, *Patrick Suskind*, and *The Woman in the Dunes*, *Kobo Abe*.

**PHILOSOPHY:** Only by occupying the "space between" can we allow ourselves the time to recognize the amazing beauty in the simplest things... Cupcakes seem to make everything better as well.

**PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD:** Libraries that want to be innovative and cutting edge, but do not support the creative talent they hire... Oh, and people who wear eyeliner, but don't wear mascara.

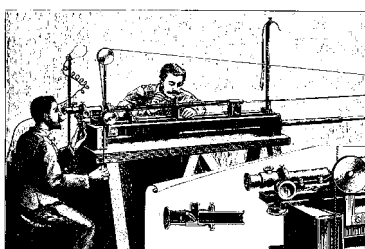
**MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT:** The day a student came back from visiting an art museum and told me a whole new world opened up for him after the talk we had about modern art and reading the books I suggested.

**GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW:** Hopefully to be in a leadership role at an institution in which I fully support its mission and share its creative vision. Did I mention *Proust*? I should mention reading *Proust* as a goal as well... 🌱

## Preserving the Vitality of Learning Commons Spaces Through Dynamic Programming: The Learning Commons After Dark Series

by **Jennifer Calvo** (Former Reference Librarian for the Learning Commons, North Carolina State University Libraries)  
<[jenni4calvo@gmail.com](mailto:jenni4calvo@gmail.com)>

**L**ibraries face an interesting challenge when planning and maintaining new learning spaces. Most are heavily used spaces designed to facilitate collaborative learning and social engagement. Attracting students to the space is not as much of a challenge as finding ways to meet the vision of the space, and keep the space both vibrant and relevant to the users. Three key components to keeping learning spaces vibrant will be discussed, as well as programming ideas from the *Learning Commons After Dark Series*.



### The History and Culture of the Commons

In 2007, the NCSU Libraries opened **D. H. Hill Library's Learning Commons**, a space designed to meet the rapidly changing

needs of today's students. It is not only a student-centered, but a student defined space with mobile furniture, soft-seating areas, and collaborative workspaces. The flexible design of the **Learning Commons**

facilitates change by offering students a place that provokes their imagination. I believe the design of the space is effective because it provides a welcoming environment for students to congregate, collaborate, and create.

The **Learning Commons** was immediately a hit with students. Even after two years the number of students in the space can top 300 at eleven o'clock at night. Students tend to linger in the space because it accommodates both their social and academic needs. I like to think of this type of use of academic library space as a new addition to a college student's lifestyle — a "Learning Commons Lifestyle."

*continued on page 40*

All in one day a student may participate in a study group session to prepare for a biology exam, take a break and order pizza to be delivered to the library, play video or board games with a group of friends, then seek assistance from a librarian in locating resources for a paper they plan to write in the **Learning Commons** at night. I know many students who consistently spend long hours in the library, and feel that the **Learning Commons** is their second home, a place that provides a sense of comfort and community.

### **Build it and They will Come....** **Now what?**

In many ways, the design of the **Learning Commons** has been a tremendous success. As previously mentioned, it is a thriving area of the library that is consistently used for learning, creating, and socializing. Now that the **Commons** has been open for two years, I believe the library is facing a challenge that many libraries with modern learning spaces will encounter.

Last summer an upperclassman led a campus tour for prospective students and their parents. As he walked the students through the **Learning Commons**, he told them that it was the largest computer lab on campus — and then left. I suddenly realized how easily a vision and a message can be lost.

One of the greatest challenges libraries with **Learning Commons** spaces will soon face is how to keep the vibrant and innovative culture of the **Commons** going once the space is a few years old. How will libraries find new ways to further the vision of the **Commons**, and prevent it from turning into just another computer lab?

I believe there are three key components to not only maintaining, but broadening the vision of the **Learning Commons**.

### **Innovative Services**

Being responsive to students' needs is always a high priority. The ability to offer new and innovative services, such as device lending in a **Learning Commons** space, affords students the opportunity to experiment with new types of devices. These types of services empower students to explore and express themselves in totally new ways. The **Learning Commons** can already support many technology oriented services because of the access to media editing software available on the computers in the space.

### **Actively Engaged Staff**

While the design of a **Learning Commons** space lends itself to collaborative and creative learning endeavors, it takes an actively engaged staff to make the space come alive. An actively engaged staff is what truly drives the **Commons** and its vision. They are always looking for new opportunities to assist students not only in locating and citing resources, but also with brainstorming for projects, suggesting works of fiction they may be interested in, and in all ways seeking out opportunities to both teach

and develop relationships with students to understand their interests and meet their needs. An actively engaged staff plays such a vital role in building a sense of community in the **Learning Commons** by getting out from behind the desk and using roaming techniques to interact with students in the space. I know that some are uncomfortable walking through tight computer stations where students are working, feeling that the student may see them as policing their activities. Whenever I roam the **Commons** I think of it as if I am hosting a party. I am not there to tell students what to do, rather, when I am roaming, I am checking to make sure that they have what they need, compliment an outfit or two, or ask about a video game someone is playing. I am always amazed how many students will begin to raise their hands and ask for assistance once they see me out from behind the service desk and interacting with them in "their" space.

### **Dynamic Programming**

The **Learning Commons** attracts so many regular users, especially in the evenings, it is a perfect time to offer community building activities, such as weekly board gaming nights and book clubs. Retro board games like **Candy Land** and **Battleship** attract a lot of attention as do more traditional library games like chess and **Monopoly**.

In the spring of 2009 I developed a series called "*Learning Commons After Dark*." The goals of the series are to create original programming that highlights the Libraries' collections and exposes students to the broader university community (much like public library programming), and to foster and further develop the **Learning Commons'** student community. The series will collaborate with university units, colleges, and groups, student organizations, and other library departments to develop interesting and dynamic programs.

Due to financial constraints some of the proposed programming for the *Learning Commons After Dark Series* was unable to be funded, but I would like to discuss some of the events we did hold, and ideas for events we would like to hold.

### **Gaming**

NCSU Libraries has hosted numerous video gaming events in the library. There is a **Multi-Player Gaming Club** on campus that expressed interest in holding events in the library. A **Super Smash Brothers** event was held on a Saturday afternoon in the **Learning Commons**. Attendance was so high it was decided that future gaming events would be held in a bigger venue with a large projection screen. The **Multi-Player Gaming Club** supplies its own soda and pizza. The library just supplies the game boxes and video screens. I try to attend most of the events so that I get to spend time with the gamers and get feedback on what types of games they like, and suggestions for games we should add to our collections. These events also offer a terrific way to meet students that may not necessarily approach a reference desk for help.

### **Workshops and Demos**

Throughout the spring semester the library offered a variety of workshops in the Presenta-

tion Practice Room, located in the **Learning Commons**. Workshops on a variety of topics were offered, including "Creating Effective PowerPoint Presentations," and a Second Life demo to assist students in setting up their first account and creating an avatar.

Most recently an ongoing photography workshop has been established to coincide with the ability of students to check out two new DSLR cameras now available through the device lending program in the **Learning Commons**. Attendance for the photography workshops has been high, and a **Facebook** page for the workshops has been created. During the next photography workshop we plan to display photography books from the libraries' collections.

### **Sock it to Me!!! The NCSU Libraries and Sock Animal Club Event**

The **Burlington Textiles Library** houses an historical hosiery collection that is much talked about in local library schools, but is not as well known at NCSU. When I heard there was a university sanctioned **Sock Animal Club** on campus, I knew that we had a perfect "*Learning Commons After Dark*" program. The **Sock Animal Club** would walk students through a sock animal project at tables set near the front of the **Learning Commons**. On two wide monitors, images of the historical hosiery collection would be shown repeatedly, with a librarian from the textiles library co-hosting the event to discuss the collection. Unfortunately we have been unable to secure funding for this event, but in the interim I have learned how to make amazing sock monkeys, flamingos, and snowmen, with some of the most patient and gracious students I have ever met.

### **Gallery Talks and Building Blocks- A Frank Gehry Event**

During the 2008 fall semester, the **Gregg Museum of Design** held an exhibition of photographs by **Gil Garcetti** documenting the construction of **Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall**.

A perfect event for the *Learning Commons After Dark Series* would include a gallery talk/presentation by the curator of the exhibition in the Presentation Practice Room (which would display **Frank Gehry** books), followed by a student building block competition. The completed block buildings would then be photographed in the same manner and style as **Gil Garcetti**, with the final images being shown on the **Learning Commons E-Boards**.

### **Conclusion**

Adding a dynamic **Learning Commons** space to a library is one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences a librarian can be a part of. If the space is designed correctly, it will be heavily used by students, and redefine how they spend time in the library. The energy and excitement about the new space will carry it for a few years, but in order for the vision of the **Commons** to move forward, remain vibrant, and innovative in spirit, staff must be actively engaged with students occupying the space, seeking out new ideas for services, and developing dynamic programming. 🌿